

# An Evaluation of the Changing Religious Composition of the Population of Northern Ireland

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*Abstract:* It is customary to think of the population of Northern Ireland as being composed of one third Roman Catholics and two thirds Protestants. This convention should now be revised, however, because of the rapid growth of the number of Catholics in recent decades and evidence is presented to show that they made up slightly more than 38 per cent of the population in 1981. If this trend continues Catholics should eventually form a majority in Northern Ireland but trends can be deceptive; declining fertility and, in consequence, a lower rate of natural increase casts considerable doubt on the inevitability of an eventual Catholic majority.

## I INTRODUCTION

During the last two to three decades a substantial shift has occurred in the religious composition of the population of Northern Ireland. It is now clear that the conventional shorthand of one million Protestants and half a million Roman Catholics is outdated because of a rapid growth in Roman Catholic numbers and that a rather different ratio now pertains. At the same time, however, it is not clear what the present denominational breakdown of the population is nor, consequently, what the new ratio should be. If it were not for the political implications of these numerical facts, impinging as they do on such fundamental questions as national allegiance and constitutional status, the changing religious demography of Northern Ireland would hardly be worthy of more than passing academic interest. But as there are those who believe that the Protestant majority will inevitably disappear because of the greater demographic vitality of the Roman Catholic population and that this is destined to bring about fundamental political change in the

comparatively near future, it does seem timely to take stock of the current position.

## II THE CENSUS AND RELIGIOUS DENOMINATION

The census of population has constituted the one comprehensive source of authoritative statistics on religious affiliation in Northern Ireland since 1861. For much of this period the picture presented by successive enumerations can be accepted as reliable. Up to 1937, very few refused to state their denomination — 0.2 per cent of the population or less — and although climbing to 0.4 per cent (5,685 persons) in 1951 and to 1.9 per cent (26,418 persons) in 1961 the uncertainty thereby introduced was minimal. For one thing, those of no religious persuasion have conventionally been treated as non-respondents and after allowance is made for this the true rates of refusal in both 1951 and 1961 are reduced significantly. For another, there are grounds for accepting that the bulk of those refusing to divulge their religious persuasion were Protestants, given the strongly developed sense of individual conscience associated with Protestantism. Up to 1961, therefore, one can accept the census as providing a broadly reliable record of religious affiliation, most certainly as regards the Roman Catholic—non-Roman Catholic breakdown of the population.

The position in 1971, by contrast, was radically different. Disruption of the census now became the avowed aim of certain elements within the population and as a consequence those refusing to state their denomination jumped to 142,511 persons or 9.4 per cent of the population. In large measure this was because Roman Catholics were actively discouraged from answering the question on religious persuasion and for the first time a substantial non-statement by Roman Catholics was recorded at a census. But equally, the number of Protestants refusing to divulge their denomination also rose, not as a result of any particular campaign of non-cooperation, but rather as an outcome of heightened political tension, and a more general concern about the confidentiality of census records, a concern incidentally which was felt throughout the United Kingdom.

Matters were even worse in 1981 and it came as no surprise when the published figures revealed that the number refusing to state religious denomination had again climbed sharply to 274,584 or 18.5 per cent of those enumerated. This time pressure not to co-operate with any aspect of the census operation was exerted in predominantly Roman Catholic areas, extending to the intimidation of actual enumerators which culminated in the fatal shooting of one of their number in Londonderry. Moreover, there are reasons for thinking that Protestants living in certain areas were also fearful of participating in the enumeration. It is therefore not surprising that many schedules

remained uncollected and the Registrar General could do no more than exhort persons to send such missing returns to him through the post. The outcome was a census that must be treated with circumspection. Not only was there a substantial refusal to state religious denomination but a significant under-enumeration of the population also occurred, initially estimated at 19,000 persons by the Registrar General but was subsequently raised to 74,000 by the Policy Planning and Research Unit (PPRU) after further evaluation. In other words, not even the size of the Northern Ireland population in 1981 is accurately known (the Registrar General's estimate of non-enumeration implies a total of 1,507,000 and PPRU's estimate a total of 1,562,000 persons) let alone the breakdown of the population by religious denomination.

The denominational statistics collected at the last two censuses of Northern Ireland are therefore highly misleading as they stand, and cannot be taken as a reliable indicator of the religious breakdown of the population. But nor should they be discounted, because they still comprise the most comprehensive body of information from which to assess recent trends; after all, more than 90 per cent of the population stated their denomination in 1971 and just under 80 per cent did the same in 1981, and these are large "samples" by any criterion. The problem is actually one of estimating non-response rates by denomination, but once these have been established the interpretation of the census findings becomes reasonably straightforward.

It is also appropriate to comment briefly here on the informal use that has been made of the membership records of the Catholic Church and of the electoral register in conjunction with voting statistics to determine the denominational composition of the population. The problem with Church records is that there is no comprehensive source of identical statistics available for the Protestant population. The combining of Catholic Church records with the 1981 census to derive the current religious balance, i.e., by subtracting Catholic membership from the total population enumerated in 1981 to generate an estimate of the non-Catholic total, is clearly an invalid procedure.<sup>1</sup> The utilisation of the electoral register in conjunction with voting statistics would seem to be an even more hazardous operation statistically in view of doubts about the completeness of the electoral register, the fact that the child population is omitted from the register and the effect of differential turn-out at elections.

1. The census of population and Church record data bases are fundamentally different and one is not therefore comparing like with like. Moreover, Church membership statistics are likely to overstate actual membership; for instance, the complexity of residential change could well lead to double counting while there is the added difficulty of making allowance for dioceses that straddle the border. It may be added that, even under ideal conditions, population statistics collected by the civil authorities are not totally accurate.

## III DENOMINATIONAL CHANGE UP TO 1961

In a survey of student opinion undertaken in Belfast in the late 1960s, most of those interviewed expressed a belief that a Roman Catholic majority would eventually emerge within Northern Ireland (Compton and Boal, 1970). In fact the belief in an eventual Roman Catholic majority is quite widely held and there is compelling evidence that appears to support this.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Roman Catholics have not only constituted a growing proportion of the population in recent years, but their birth rate remains higher and the average size of their families larger than those of their Protestant counterparts. Yet to divorce these facts from the wider historical perspective can be misleading and it should be remembered that the growing Roman Catholic element within the Northern Ireland population is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Thus, from the time religious affiliation was first recorded in the census of 1861 through to 1926 both the number and percentage of Roman Catholics in what is now Northern Ireland declined (Table 1). It is only since 1937 that Catholic numbers have been expanding more rapidly than the Protestant population; moreover, it is only since 1961 that this faster rate of growth has had any marked impact on the religious balance of Northern Ireland.

Two important lessons are to be derived from this brief excursion into history. The first is that trends do not remain constant over time but, on the contrary, are continuously changing. The second relates to the large "forecasting" errors that can be made by extrapolating the trends associated with particular time intervals. Selection of the decade 1881 to 1891, for example, when the Protestant population was growing at a rate of 0.24 per cent per annum and the Roman Catholic population declining by 1 per cent per annum, would have forecast a Northern Ireland population of 1,240,000 in 1981, of whom barely 15 per cent would have been Roman Catholics. By the same token even though extrapolation of the trend for any time interval since 1937 would suggest an ultimate Roman Catholic majority there can be no certainty that this will actually happen.

It is also important to remember that the temporal changes in denomination breakdown have not been a function solely of differential rates of net out-migration, but of fundamental shifts in vital rates as well. Thus, the respective proportions of 0-4 year olds in the two denominations lends strong weight to the view that the Protestant birth rate, and presumably

2. Moxon-Browne (1983) reports that three-quarters of a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population interviewed in 1978 believed that the border between Northern and Southern Ireland would disappear at some stage in the future; Boal, Campbell and Livingstone's recent survey of the attitudes of church-going Protestants in Belfast found that over three-quarters believed that Roman Catholics would eventually form the majority community in Northern Ireland.

Table 1: *Population change by religious affiliation – 1861-1961*

<i>Intercensal period</i>	<i>All denominations</i>			<i>Roman Catholics</i>			<i>Other denominations</i>			<i>Per cent</i>
	<i>No. at beginning of period</i>	<i>Change Number</i>	<i>Change per cent per annum</i>	<i>No. at beginning of period</i>	<i>Change Number</i>	<i>Change per cent per annum</i>	<i>No. at beginning of period</i>	<i>Change Number</i>	<i>Change per cent per annum</i>	<i>Roman Catholic at beginning of period</i>
1861-1871	1,396,453	-37,263	-0.27	571,690	-37,249	-0.67	824,763	-14	-0.00	40.9
1871-1881	1,359,190	-54,374	-0.41	534,441	-38,882	-0.75	824,749	-15,492	-0.19	39.3
1881-1891	1,304,816	-68,760	-0.54	495,559	-47,255	-1.00	809,257	-21,505	-0.27	38.0
1891-1901	1,236,056	896	0.01	448,304	-17,914	-0.41	787,752	18,810	0.24	36.3
1901-1911	1,236,952	13,579	0.11	430,390	-229	-0.01	806,562	13,808	0.17	34.8
1911-1926	1,250,531	6,030	0.03	430,161	-9,733	-0.15	820,370	15,763	0.13	34.4
1926-1937	1,256,561	23,184	0.17	420,428	7,862	0.17	836,133	15,322	0.17	33.5
1937-1951	1,279,745	91,176	0.49	428,290	43,170	0.68	851,455	48,006	0.39	33.5
1951-1961	1,370,921	54,121	0.39	471,460	26,087	0.54	899,461	28,034	0.31	34.4
1961-	1,425,042	-	-	497,547	-	-	927,495	-	-	34.9

*Source:* Census of Ireland 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911.

Census of Northern Ireland 1926, 1937, 1951 and 1961.

rate of natural increase, was in fact higher than the Catholic rate up to about 1911. By 1937, however, the position had not only reversed, but the Catholic birth rate also began to move strongly upwards in subsequent years from about 23 per 1,000 in 1937 to a peak of just under 30 per 1,000 in 1964. The Protestant rate, by contrast, fluctuated within the rather narrow range 18 to 19.5 per 1,000. In other words, the decline in the proportion of Roman Catholics before 1926 was generated not only by a higher rate of net out-migration but also by a lower birth rate and lower rate of natural increase. On the other hand, the rise in the Catholic proportion since 1937 is as much attributable to a rising birth rate and rising rate of natural increase as to any decline in the rate of net out-migration.

#### IV THE RELIGIOUS BREAKDOWN IN 1971

Although the problem of estimating religious denomination from the 1971 census has been considered elsewhere (Compton, 1976; 1978), it is appropriate to restate the arguments behind the corrections for that year because the credibility of the estimates for 1981 is largely dependent upon the reliability of the corrections for 1971. The change from an enumerated to usually resident population base for the tabulation of religious denomination in 1971 is a further complicating factor because it affects the figures for intercensal change, and it is for this reason that the 1971 data were reworked to a base more nearly comparable with that adopted for earlier censuses — the so-called modified enumeration base.<sup>3</sup> During the reworking, the opportunity was also taken to reclassify the category “denomination not stated” and to separate from the genuine refusals those responses more appropriately classed as of “no religious persuasion”, i.e., when the question on denomination in 1971 was answered with the word “none”.

The outcome of these changes is summarised in Table 2. The modified enumeration base produced slightly larger totals of Roman Catholics, Protestants and other religions, while the reworking of the not-stateds reduced the number of genuine refusals from 142,511 to 135,290 and increased those of no religious persuasion from 1,914 to 11,646.

The determination of the actual breakdown of the population by religious denomination in 1971 is thus one of apportioning the 135,290 refusals to the appropriate denomination. As no post-censal survey was undertaken to assess the denomination of these individuals, a statistical method of assignment had to be adopted. The problem would have been trivial if one could

3. The modified enumeration base consists of the enumerated population in 1971 less H.M. Armed Forces stationed in barracks. The troops in barracks were, by and large, those on temporary tours of duty to combat terrorism and are more properly excluded from consideration here.

Table 2: *The religious breakdown of the population in 1971: modified enumeration (ME) base and the usually resident (UR) base*

	<i>ME base</i>		<i>UR base</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
Roman Catholics	479,945	31.4	477,919	31.4
Protestants	898,506	58.8	895,166	58.9
Other religions	2,169	0.1	2,130	0.1
No religious persuasion	11,646	0.8	1,914	0.1
Denomination not stated	135,290	8.9	142,511	9.5
<i>Total</i>	1,527,556	100.0	1,519,640	100.0

*Source:* Northern Ireland Census of Population 1971.

have assumed an equal rate of non-response across the entire population, but this was clearly not the case given the pressure exerted on Roman Catholics not to co-operate with the census. The strong linear relationship, however, between the ward pattern of non-statement and the proportion of stating Roman Catholics/Protestants pointed to a simple regression procedure as an appropriate method of apportionment in which the parameters of the regression equation would be utilised for the actual assignment. In the event this method was adopted.

Although the results obtained from the procedure can only provide an estimate of the actual denominational breakdown, the goodness of fit of the regression equation was such that the correction could be accepted with some confidence. This suggested that of the 135,000 refusals, 82,500 or 61 per cent were refusals by Roman Catholics and 52,500 or 39 per cent were by Protestants. In relative terms the non-response rate was thus approximately three times higher amongst Roman Catholics than amongst Protestants, 14.6 per cent compared with 5.5 per cent.

Adjusting the enumerated totals by these amounts produces a rather different picture of the religious breakdown of the population than is suggested by the published census figures (Table 3). The correction indicates that 562,500 rather than the 479,945 actually enumerated was a truer estimate of the number of Roman Catholics; the number of Protestants should also have been higher at 951,000 as opposed to the enumerated total of 898,500 while the total number of all Other Denominations (ODs) in the population should have been 965,000. In other words the actual religious breakdown of the population is more likely to have been 36.8 per cent Roman Catholics and 63.2 per cent ODs than the enumerated 31.4 and 59.7 per cent, respectively, with 8.9 per cent refusals.

Table 3: *Estimated religious breakdown of the Northern Ireland population in 1971 by apportionment of the refusals*

	<i>ME base</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
Roman Catholics	562,500	36.8
Protestants	951,000	62.3
Other religions	2,200	0.1
No religious persuasion	11,800	0.8
<i>Total</i>	1,527,500	100.0

*Source:* Northern Ireland Census of Population 1971.

The results obtained from the apportionment broadly agree with the totals arrived at independently from the population dynamics of the intercensal period, i.e., by applying the appropriate values of natural increase and net migration to the denominational totals for 1961 (Table 4).<sup>4</sup> Roman Catholic natural increase was considerably higher than that of non-Roman Catholics: 99,000 as opposed to 72,500, reflecting the substantially higher Roman Catholic birth rate, but was partly offset by higher Catholic net out-migration, 41,500 compared with 27,500 for non-Catholics. Applying these values to the denominational breakdown recorded in 1961 and assuming that all those refusing to state a denomination in 1961 were non-Roman Catholics gives estimates of 555,000 Roman Catholics and 972,500 non-Roman Catholics for 1971, or 36.3 and 63.7 per cent of the total population. A pro rata distribution of refusals, in 1961 on the other hand, yields the slightly different figures of 562,500 or 36.8 per cent Roman Catholics and 965,000 or 63.2 per cent non-Roman Catholics, i.e., identical to the values obtained by apportioning the refusals.

4. Data for births, deaths, and migration are not available by denomination and the reliability of the method is dependent upon the accuracy with which these parameters can be estimated. Suffice it to say that the birth totals were obtained by reconciling Spencer's values (Spencer, 1979) based on Roman Catholic baptismal records with the findings of the 1971 census fertility schedules. The respective death rates were derived by assuming that Roman Catholic age-specific death rates were five per cent higher than those of Protestants, reflecting the social class discrepancy between the two groups. Net migration values were based on the assumption that Roman Catholics accounted for 60 per cent and Protestants for 40 per cent of the net outflow over the intercensal period, i.e., that the differential observed between 1951 and 1961 was carried forward into the next decade unchanged.

Table 4: *Estimated religious breakdown of the Northern Ireland population in 1971: method of population dynamics*<sup>1</sup>

	<i>Roman Catholics</i>				<i>Other denominations</i>			
	<i>a</i> <sup>2</sup> <i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>b</i> <sup>3</sup> <i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>a</i> <sup>2</sup> <i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>b</i> <sup>3</sup> <i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
Population in 1961	497,547	34.9	505,000	35.4	927,495	65.1	920,000	64.6
Natural increase 1961-1971	99,000	—	99,000	—	72,500	—	72,500	—
Net migration	41,500	—	-41,500	—	27,500	—	-27,500	—
Population in 1971	555,047	36.3	562,500	36.8	972,495	63.7	965,000	63.2

*Notes:* <sup>1</sup>Of the 28,418 classed as religion not stated in 1961, 21,000 are assumed to have been true refusals and the remainder to have been of no religious persuasion.

<sup>2</sup>Treating all refusals in 1961 as non-Roman Catholic.

<sup>3</sup>Distributing refusals in 1961 on a pro rata basis.

## V THE RELIGIOUS BREAKDOWN IN 1981

The position in 1981 was even less clear cut. Two hundred and seventy-four thousand, five hundred and eighty-four individuals are recorded in the published statistics as refusing to state their denomination, but as otherwise participating in the census. This amounted to 18.5 per cent of the enumerated population, although when an allowance is made for those more appropriately classed as those of no religious persuasion — a conservative estimate would be 10,000 judging from the experience of 1971 — the number of true refusals was somewhat lower.

In addition to this, there is also the matter of the size of the non-enumerated population and their presumed religious denomination. The Registrar General's estimate, based on a grossing-up procedure from the estimated number of non-enumerated households, put the number of individuals missed at just under 19,000. Since a reasonably accurate count of the number of households was presumably established from the tally kept during the initial distribution of enumeration schedules, this estimate was at first accepted as reliable. Subsequent comparisons, however, of the enumerated population under the age of 15 with the corresponding group for whom child benefit payments are made and of the enumerated 5-14 age group with school census data conclusively indicated that child under-enumeration alone was in excess of the Registrar General's estimate of under-enumeration within the population as a whole (Policy Planning and Research Unit, 1983). The need for a substantial upward revision of the non-enumerated total was therefore indicated and a figure of 74,100 has now been accepted for official purposes.

However, there are strong grounds for thinking that this latest revision in turn errs on the high side because of the way adult non-enumeration was estimated. The estimate of child non-enumeration is based on the comparison of hard data and is therefore broadly correct, but the link between child non-enumeration and non-enumeration among the population at large was founded on the fairly arbitrary assumption that 40 per cent of the non-enumerated were under the age of 15 and 60 per cent aged 15 and over. A more rigorous examination of the evidence, however, suggests that this assumption over-states the extent of adult non-enumeration. For instance, a comparison between the census population aged 17 and over in 1971, when the enumeration is accepted as being complete, and the population on the electoral register nearest to the time of the census yields the same relative and absolute discrepancy as does an identical comparison for 1981. Adult non-enumeration in 1981 at the level assumed by PPRU, on the contrary, should have shown up as a substantial widening of the discrepancy. Moreover, the PPRU estimate of non-enumeration implies a significantly

lower level of net out-migration over the last intercensal period than the summation of the annual migration estimates, which in turn may be understated as they take no account of movements to and from the Irish Republic. The detailed arguments in support of a somewhat lower level of non-enumeration have been published elsewhere (Compton, 1985). Suffice it to say that around 46,000, as opposed to 74,100, would now seem a more realistic figure of non-enumerated population from the available evidence and it is this figure that is therefore used here. Acceptance of this level of non-enumeration implies that the Northern Ireland population was virtually the same in 1981 as in 1971 – circa 1,535,000. This is not, however, to say that the population was static over the intercensal period; rather it is presumed to have declined during the first half of the 1970s as a result of heavy net out-migration largely due to the Troubles but subsequently to have recovered to the 1971 total by 1981.

As the initial step in our appraisal of the denominational situation in 1981 we have set out in Table 5 the enumerated census population broken down by religious persuasion together with the estimated non-enumerated population. Unlike 1971, it is clear from the geographical pattern of non-response that about as many Protestants refused to record their denomination as Roman Catholics. For instance, while it is true that the highest absolute values of non-response were recorded in predominantly Roman Catholic local government districts (e.g., Newry and Mourne 17,200 and Londonderry 15,800), non-response was also substantial in Protestant districts (e.g., Ards 9,500, North Down 11,900 and even Ballymena 6,900) and such areas outnumber Roman Catholic districts by a large margin.

Table 5: *The population in 1981 by religious denomination (usual residence base)*

Roman Catholics		414,532
Protestants		788,253
Other religions		2,449
No religious persuasion		2,141
Denomination } not stated }	Refusals	264,584
	No religion <sup>1</sup>	10,000
Non-enumerated		46,000
<i>Total</i>		1,527,959

Source: The Northern Ireland Census of Population 1981: Religion Tables.

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Estimated from the pattern for 1971.

It is difficult, however, to reach any firm conclusions from these district council area data because the majority of districts are of a mixed denominational complexion and there is the obvious danger of drawing false inferences from ecological associations. The small area ward data, on the other hand, present a less ambiguous picture. Many wards are virtually homogeneous by denomination as shown not only by census data but also by studies of residential segregation by religion and areas such as these form a reasonable basis from which to assess the levels of non-statement, i.e., in those instances where wards are completely homogeneous, the presumption would be that individuals not stating a denomination are either all Roman Catholic or all non-Roman Catholic, reflecting the particular composition of the ward.

The 107 virtually homogeneous Protestant wards are most valuable in this respect.<sup>5</sup> The aggregate level of non-statement in the wards was 14.8 per cent of the enumerated population; which would also have been the OD rate if the wards had been entirely homogeneous. But since the Catholic presence was small, only 2.7 per cent of the population, the non-statement rate of ODs in these wards can still be fixed within narrow limits, provided realistic assumptions are made about the Catholic non-statement rate. The small area data show fairly conclusively that Catholic non-statement could not have been lower than the OD rate, and a pro rata distribution of non-statement, in the proportions in which the denominations were enumerated, therefore, provides the highest possible value of OD non-statement. But it is equally clear from the small-area data that Roman Catholic non-statement did not exceed an average rate of 35 per cent and this can be taken as marking the lower limit of possible OD non-statement. Under these bounding assumptions, it is calculated that the OD rate of non-statement would have fallen in the range 14.0 to 14.8 per cent.

The identical exercise can be repeated for the 41 virtually homogeneous Roman Catholic wards. The rates of non-statement in these areas were quite variable, ranging from 16.7 per cent of the enumerated population of Westland ward in Derry District to 37.4 per cent in Washing Bay in Dungannon District. If it is assumed that all those refusing to state a denomination in these areas were Roman Catholic, then the maximum possible level of Roman Catholic non-statement was 26.4 per cent. A rate of 25.7 per cent is, however, obtained from a pro rata apportionment of non-statement.

The utility of these rates as a means of apportioning the non-statement

5. Homogeneous Protestant wards are defined as those wards in which less than 6 per cent of the population enumerated in 1981 were Roman Catholics. Non-statement in these areas was quite variable, ranging from 7.2 per cent of the enumerated population in Lisnasharragh ward in Belfast to 21.1 per cent in Clandeboye in North Down. There was also considerable variability among the wards within each district council area.

and correcting the denominational totals is dependent upon the degree to which they can be taken as representative of Northern Ireland as a whole. There is also the further condition that the respective rates of non-statement applied to the stated Roman Catholic and OD values should generate the correct total for non-statement. As regards the representativeness of the OD rates, there are certainly reasonable grounds for extending these to the entire OD population of Northern Ireland; the 107 wards from which the rates were derived make up just over one-fifth of all wards, and contained 36 per cent of the OD population enumerated in 1981. The representativeness of the Roman Catholic rates, however, is more problematical. They were derived from only 8 per cent of the wards and only 21 per cent of the enumerated Roman Catholic population. There is also evidence from the pattern of small area data that in many parts of Northern Ireland the Roman Catholic rate of non-statement was substantially less than in the wards examined. (In the less polarised areas there appears to have been little significant difference in the respective non-statement rates.) In other words, whereas there are reasonable grounds for thinking that the non-statement rate for the overall OD population lies somewhere within the range determined from the 107 wards, the overall Roman Catholic rate is more likely to be below the range calculated above. The solution was to place the OD non-statement rate at the bottom of the OD range, i.e., 14.0 per cent. The Roman Catholic rate then becomes 24.6 per cent.

Using these rates the apportionment of the non-statement and the upward adjustment of the enumerated Roman Catholic and OD totals becomes a matter of simple arithmetic. To these adjusted totals, however, must be added the estimated non-enumerated population of 46,000 which has been broken down in the ratio 75 per cent Roman Catholic and 25 per cent Other Denominations on the evidence of small area data for affected districts,<sup>6</sup> plus the addition of the 10,000 more appropriately classed as of no religious persuasion to the OD side of the balance. The outcome of these adjustments to the resident and transfer base populations<sup>7</sup> is summarised in Table 6. The adjusted number of Roman Catholics (usual residence base) is just under

6. The district councils affected by non-enumeration were Belfast, Cookstown, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Magherafelt, Newry-Mourne, Omagh and Strabane. The enumeration in the remaining 18 districts is considered to have been satisfactory (Policy Planning and Research Unit, 1983).

7. The transfer base population consists of the population who were present and resident at their normal address at the time of the census, together with those who appeared in the enumeration and who were normally resident in Northern Ireland but who were not at their usual address at the time of the census. Such individuals are transferred back to their usual residence and include those who were enumerated but were either at another address in Northern Ireland or were outside Northern Ireland at the time of the census. It is a better estimator of the normally resident population than the usual residence base and gives a marginally higher proportion of ODs in the population.

Table 6: *Estimated religious breakdown of the Northern Ireland population in 1981 by apportioning the refusals and the non-enumerated.*<sup>1</sup>

	<i>Usual Residence Base</i>		<i>Transfer Base</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
<i>Roman Catholics</i>				
Stated	414,267	27.1	415,254	27.1
Refusals	135,000	8.8	135,500	8.8
Non-enumerated	34,500	2.3	34,500	2.3
<i>Total</i>	583,767	38.2	585,254	38.2
<i>Other Denominations</i>				
Stated	792,735	51.9	795,005	51.9
Refusals	129,300	8.5	129,700	8.8
Non-enumerated	11,500	0.8	11,500	0.8
Presumed no religion <sup>2</sup>	10,000	0.7	10,000	0.7
<i>Total</i>	943,535	61.8 <sup>3</sup>	946,205	61.8 <sup>3</sup>

Notes: <sup>1</sup>The stated numbers of Roman Catholics and Other Denominations have been recalculated and marginally differ from the published totals.

<sup>2</sup>See note 1, Table 5.

<sup>3</sup>Rounding errors account for discrepancy in the summation.

584,000 or 38.2 per cent of the total (585,000 and also 38.2 per cent on a transfer basis) while the estimated number of ODs becomes 943,500 (946,000 on a transfer basis).

The simple regression procedure used for 1971 was repeated on the 1981 data and yields broadly similar results. The relationship between per cent not stating and per cent enumerated Roman Catholics/Other Denominations is not, however, particularly strong ( $r = 0.60$ ) and there is therefore no reason to believe that this method produces more accurate correction parameters than that of the homogeneous wards. Suffice it to say that the method generated estimated non-statement rates of 13.7 and 25.0 per cent for ODs and Roman Catholics, respectively. Applying these rates to the resident population base and making the additional adjustments for non-enumeration and those presumed to be of no religious persuasion yields an estimated total of 590,000 (38.6 per cent) Roman Catholics and 938,000 (61.4 per cent) Other Denominations in 1981.

The third approach to the estimation of the religious breakdown in 1981 is, of course, via the population dynamics of the 1970s. Natural increase for 1971-81 can again be fairly reliably established using the same procedures as for 1961-71. The determination of net migration is more problematical. No hard data exist on recent trends in net migration by denomination, but the limited evidence that is available, albeit of a circumstantial nature,

suggests that the traditional pattern was maintained during the 1970s. This means apportioning the estimated net out-migration of 110,000 for the period 1971 to 1981 in the ratio 60 per cent Roman Catholic (i.e., 66,000) and 40 per cent non-Roman Catholic (i.e., 44,000). There are reasons for believing this to be a reasonable assumption. First, the bulk of out-migration between 1971 and 1981 occurred before 1976, and in considerable part was stimulated by the Troubles. Secondly, the first half of the 1970s was a period when labour migration was still comparatively easy. Thirdly, there is strong circumstantial and some hard evidence of a significant net movement of people from Northern Ireland to the Irish Republic in response to the Republic's economic boom of the mid-1970s. Given the fact of geographical proximity it would be extraordinary if Northern Ireland had not contributed something to the net migration gain (put at 110,000 persons) recorded by the Republic between 1971 and 1979, and labour force surveys in fact suggest a gross influx of 25,000 from the North during the 1970s (*The Irish Times*, 1983). Each of these factors is likely to have been a substantially greater generator of Catholic than Protestant out-movement. In addition, a higher proportion of the Catholic population lies within the age range when geographical mobility is most likely to occur. In more recent years the proportion of Protestants within the net out-migration stream may well have risen, but because these have also been years of substantially lower rates of net out-flow, this is unlikely to have had any significant impact on the overall balance of net out-migration during the last intercensal period as a whole.<sup>8</sup> The calculation based on the estimated values of natural increase and net migration is presented in Table 7, and suggests a population made up of 37.6 per cent Roman Catholics and 62.4 per cent Other Denominations in 1981.

Table 7: *Estimated religious breakdown of the Northern Ireland population in 1981: method of population dynamics*

	<i>Roman Catholic</i>		<i>Other Denominations</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1971 estimate	562,000	36.8	965,000	63.2
Natural increase				
1971-81	78,000	—	30,000	—
Net migration				
1971-81	-66,000	—	-44,000	—
Balancing factor	—	—	3,000	—
1981 estimate	574,000	37.6	951,000	62.4

8. Whereas net migration is put at -12,000 annually for the years 1971 to 1975 by 1980/1 it had dropped to -6,200 (Registrar General, 1981).

The three separate calculations, i.e., two by apportionment and the one by population dynamics, yield figures that are in reasonably close agreement with each other. They are best interpreted as defining the probable range within which the denominational composition of the Northern Ireland population lay in 1981, i.e., 37.6 to 38.6 per cent Roman Catholics and 61.4 to 62.4 per cent Other Denominations. The mid-point of the range gives a breakdown of 38.1 and 61.9 per cent. These estimates, of course, are only as good as the assumptions on which they rest and may need revision if additional evidence becomes available suggesting modification of the net migration assumptions, or modifications of the apportionment of the non-respondents to the question on religion, or modification of the estimate of the Northern Ireland population in 1981.

We are aware that the Catholic proportion in 1981 has been placed as high as 42.5 per cent in some quarters (Curran, 1984). These higher values are based on Roman Catholic diocesan records of Church membership which purport to show a Roman Catholic population of 620,000-640,000 in Northern Ireland. To our knowledge, however, the reliability of these records has not been established. Problems clearly arise from the fact that dioceses and even parishes straddle the border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. Migration both within and outside Northern Ireland could also lead to individuals being on the records of more than one diocese or parish at any given time. Moreover, the dynamics associated with an estimate of 42.5 per cent Catholic in 1981 produce such highly implausible net migration values that justify its rejection on this ground alone — i.e., a net inflow of 9,000 Catholics to Northern Ireland and net out-migration of 116,000 Protestants as set out in Table 8.

There is no evidence of a mass exodus of Protestants during the 1970s, and certainly no evidence of an influx of Roman Catholics. Even the proposition that 40 per cent of the Northern Ireland population in 1981 was made up of Roman Catholics produces what seems suspiciously low and high levels of Catholic and non-Catholic net out-migration respectively (Table 8).

What is clear, however, is the enormous demographic vitality conferred on the Roman Catholic population by their high birth rate of recent decades. Between 1961 and 1981, Roman Catholic natural increase is estimated to have amounted to around 175,000 persons compared with non-Catholic natural increase of just over 100,000. The respective rates of natural increase over this same 20 year period highlight the contrast even more strongly, viz., a 35.6 per cent increase among Roman Catholics and an 11.0 per cent increase for non-Roman Catholics. Although the full impact of this disparity has been moderated by differential net out-migration, the difference in actual population growth rates has been substantial (16.0 per cent for Roman Catholics and 3.3 per cent for Other Denominations) and it is this that has brought

Table 8: *Population dynamics 1971-1981 associated with the propositions that 42.5 and 40.0 per cent of the Northern Ireland population were Roman Catholics in 1981*

	<i>Assumption – 42.5 per cent</i>				<i>Assumption – 40.0 per cent</i>			
	<i>Roman Catholics</i>		<i>Other Denominations</i>		<i>Roman Catholics</i>		<i>Other Denominations</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
Estimated population in 1971	562,000	36.8	965,000	63.2	562,000	36.8	965,000	63.2
Natural increase 1971-1981	78,000	—	30,000	—	78,000	—	30,000	—
Hypothetical net migration 1971-1981	9,000	—	-116,000	—	-29,000	—	-78,000	—
Hypothetical population in 1981	649,000	42.5	879,000	57.5	611,000	40.0	917,000	60.0

about the rise in the Roman Catholic proportion of the Northern Ireland population from 34.9 per cent in 1961 to an estimated 38 per cent in 1981.

## VI FUTURE PROSPECTS

The widespread belief that Roman Catholics will eventually form the majority of the Northern Ireland population, if only because of the differences that exist between the respective birth rates of the two denominations, has already been noted. Moreover, any population projection based on the denominational birth and death rates of the last 50 years would certainly lend credence to this belief. For example, the forward projection of the rates applicable to the years 1961-66 yielded a simple Roman Catholic majority by the year 2011 and suggested the emergence of a Roman Catholic majority within the under 15 age group as early as 1985 (Compton and Boal, 1970). An identical projection based on the rates appropriate to the years 1976-81 differs only in the time taken to reach majority, i.e., a simple majority by the year 2026 and a majority of the under 15 age group by the end of the century. The difference in time scales reflects the combined impact of the syphoning off of population through net out-migration during the interval separating the two projections and the reduction in the Roman Catholic rate of natural increase from the peak of the mid-1960s.

Such projections demonstrate that the approach of a Roman Catholic majority would first be heralded by a change in the denominational balance amongst the youngest population thereafter spreading progressively to more age groups as successive birth cohorts enter the population. But as the most recent school census data for 1983 make clear, we are still some way from this initial point. As Table 9 demonstrates, non-Roman Catholics<sup>9</sup> are still in a decisive majority within the primary school population as a whole, even among the youngest pupils aged 5 and under, i.e., those born in 1977 and 1978 when Roman Catholic baptismal records suggested that the balance had already in fact been tipped. It is true that the Roman Catholic proportion within primary schools has been rising over the years. It is also true that the Roman Catholic proportion is higher among younger pupils. The peak, however, does not occur at age 5 (48.5 per cent) as would be consistent with the rising proportion of Roman Catholic birth rates suggested by Catholic baptismal records but rather at age 6 (48.7 per cent).

9. Non-Roman Catholics are defined as pupils not attending primary schools controlled by the Roman Catholic Church and are composed of the pupils in controlled primary, controlled preparatory and voluntary preparatory schools together with a small number in voluntary primary schools. Maintained voluntary primary schools are assumed to be exclusively Roman Catholic. The 12 such schools with a Protestant ethos have not been separated out so as to compensate for the limited number of Roman Catholic pupils that attend schools in the controlled and voluntary preparatory sectors.

Table 9: Distribution of primary school pupils by age and type of school 1983

Age	Presumed non-Roman Catholic			Presumed Roman Catholic			Total	Per cent Roman Catholic	
	Controlled Primary	Voluntary Primary	Controlled Grammar Preparatory	Voluntary Grammar Preparatory	Maintained Voluntary	Voluntary Primary			Voluntary Grammar Preparatory
5	12,131	16	80	370	12,597	11,834	46	11,880	48.5
6	12,168	19	90	397	12,674	12,007	41	12,048	48.7
7	12,272	14	106	456	12,848	11,837	19	11,856	48.0
8	12,949	15	111	567	13,642	11,966	20	11,986	46.8
9	13,503	13	125	598	14,239	12,616	20	12,636	47.0
10	13,998	15	115	657	14,785	12,715	25	12,743	46.3
11	6,650	13	49	318	7,030	6,325	13	6,340	47.4
5-11	83,671	105	676	3,363	87,815	79,300	184	79,489	47.5
5-10	77,021	92	627	3,045	80,785	72,975	171	73,149	47.5

Source: Figures kindly supplied by The Statistics Branch, Department of Education Northern Ireland.

The inferences drawn about religious denomination from these data are the author's own. They in no way reflect the views of DENI, who do not maintain a record of pupils' religious denomination.

Although it is too early to judge whether this slight fall is significant — school census data for other years do not record a similar dip at age 5 — there is certainly much evidence to suggest that Roman Catholic fertility has been dropping since at least the mid-1960s. A recent fertility survey conducted throughout Northern Ireland in the summer of 1983 has revealed that although the average family size of married Roman Catholic women under the age of 60 is still somewhat in excess of 3 children, this represents a substantial reduction compared with the corresponding value for the early 1970s (Table 10). An even larger fall has been recorded in and around Belfast where the average size of Roman Catholic families is now well under 3 children. As opposed to this the average number of children born to non-Catholic families has remained virtually unchanged over the same period, and should this trend continue the equalisation of the average family sizes of the two groups might be expected within 25 years across Northern Ireland as a whole and perhaps more significantly within the next 10 years in Belfast and suburbs (Compton, Coward and Wilson-Davis, 1985).

The likely trend that fertility will follow during the next decades therefore becomes the crucial imponderable in any judgement about the future population balance. The experiences of other countries suggest that once Roman Catholic fertility decline is firmly established, it is a process that tends to accelerate (e.g., Demeny, 1972; Livi-Bacci, 1977). It is also a process that spreads outwards from the major urban centres with increasing intensity. The fact that this pattern is now emerging in Northern Ireland

Table 10: *Family sizes by religious denomination (average number of children born to ever married women under the age of 60)*

<i>Northern Ireland</i>				
	<i>1971<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>1983<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Per cent decline</i>	<i>Projected equalisation (years from 1983)</i>
Roman Catholic	3.64	3.24	11.0	
Non-Roman Catholic	2.37	2.29	2.0	<i>circa 25</i>
<i>Belfast and suburbs</i>				
	<i>1971<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>1983<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Per cent decline</i>	<i>Projected equalisation (years from 1983)</i>
Roman Catholic	3.47	2.81	19.0	
Non-Roman Catholic	2.18	2.14	2.0	<i>circa 10</i>

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Derived from the 1971 census fertility data (Compton, 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Northern Ireland Fertility Survey under the direction of P.A. Compton and J. Coward.

is therefore highly suggestive for the future and would seem to indicate the possibility of approximate equalisation of family sizes by denomination in substantially less than the 25 years above. A time scale nearer to the 10 years projected for Belfast is not an unlikely prognosis. The recently published work of Sexton and Dillon (1984) shows a similar sharp fall in Roman Catholic fertility in the Irish Republic, although until recently the birth rate has been cushioned from this effect because rising nuptiality, the growing number of women of reproductive age and timing have compensated for any decline in marital fertility. Now, however, this system of compensation has begun to break down, and Sexton and Dillon anticipate a substantial reduction in the number of live births in the Republic from the peak levels of the late 1970s during the rest of the 1980s. Catholic fertility in Northern Ireland is clearly evolving along a similar path but this is no more than one would expect since the Catholics of Northern and Southern Ireland form a single population as far as demographic behaviour is concerned (see, for example, Coward, 1980; Walsh, 1970).

However, a reduction in the number of Roman Catholic births is not a sufficient condition for the proportion of Roman Catholic births in the Northern Ireland total also to fall; for this to occur the rate of decline must be faster than any decline that may be taking place simultaneously within the Protestant population (or in the case of a rising number of births, the Roman Catholic increase must be occurring at a slower pace). The evidence in this respect is still rather tenuous, but the slight drop in the proportion of Roman Catholic 5 year olds in primary schools in 1983 may be a pointer in this direction. A further possibly significant feature is the recent drop in the proportion of marriages to Roman Catholics. After many decades of almost uninterrupted growth Catholic marriages plateaued at 40.2 per cent of the total in each of the years 1978, 1979 and 1980 but, according to the provisional figures of the Registrar General, have since fallen back in both absolute and relative terms – to 38.1 per cent in 1982 and to 33.3 per cent in the first quarter of 1983 (the corresponding figure for the first quarter of 1982 was 36.8 per cent). Such a development might be expected to have some impact on the number of Roman Catholic births and it is perhaps no coincidence that the number of live births registered in Northern Ireland dropped in both 1981 and 1982 at the very time when changes in the age structure of the female population of reproductive age would have led one to anticipate a continuation of the rise recorded between 1977 and 1980. There is, of course, no direct way of discovering how this recent decline in the birth rate has been distributed between the two denominations, but given the fall in the number and proportion of Roman Catholic marriages, it is not unreasonable to infer that a drop in the number of Roman Catholic births was in part responsible.

There are then signs that Northern Ireland has entered a new demographic phase. The findings of the Northern Ireland Fertility Survey confirm that Roman Catholic fertility has been declining rapidly for more than a decade now, whereas non-Roman Catholic fertility has remained essentially static. The Roman Catholic birth rate, none the less, seems to have held up well until the late 1970s, because of the beneficial effects of rising nuptiality, a faster increase in the number of women of reproductive age and a lesser propensity to defer births, but the most recent evidence suggests that this is now changing. A continuation of the present trend in fertility indicates that denominational differences in family size may disappear completely within less than 25 years, and an eventual convergence of the respective crude birth rates may therefore be anticipated, although occupying a longer timespan due to age structure effects. Moreover, as the Roman Catholic population ages, so the respective crude death rates may be expected to converge, and one can therefore anticipate an eventual elimination of the present disparity in rates of natural increase as well.

As has already been shown, extrapolation of the denominational birth and death rates for the period 1976 to 1981 produces a Roman Catholic majority in the Northern Ireland population by the year 2026. A more realistic projection, however, would incorporate the likelihood of the eventual convergence of the respective birth rates, in which case the precise evolution of the population balance will be a function of the speed of this convergence. For example, if convergence occurs at a constant rate over a period of 25 years from an initial starting position of 600,000 Roman Catholics and 940,000 non-Roman Catholics, the eventual outcome would be a stable population balance with non-Roman Catholics forming a 58 per cent majority. A slower rate of convergence, say after 40 years, is more likely, however, in which case a stable balance would again be the outcome, but with non-Roman Catholics in a 55 per cent majority, while convergence after 90 years would create a stable balance with each group forming half the population. Only a slower speed to convergence would produce an eventual Roman Catholic majority. In other words, the likelihood of an eventual Roman Catholic majority, despite superficial appearances to the contrary, is now receding and is more remote than seemed possible a decade or so ago.

Assumptions about migration have not been built into these projections; net population outflow is now running at a low level due to the lack of opportunities outside Northern Ireland, and as long as these circumstances continue, migration is unlikely materially to affect the speed of convergence. However, should the demand for labour pick up again outside Northern Ireland one would anticipate a sympathetic increase in the rate of net outflow. In the event of a sharp rise in Protestant out-migration, the probability of a Roman Catholic majority would be brought closer. But were the result

to be the re-establishment of the historical pattern of very high Roman Catholic out-migration the possibility that Roman Catholics might again form a declining proportion of the Northern Ireland population, as in the decades before 1926, cannot be ruled out, especially if birth rates are lower.

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